

Symbolic Meaning System of Chao Embroidery Patterns

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Abstract: As an important branch of Yue embroidery, Chao Embroidery is famous for its artistic characteristics such as full composition, rich colors, complex stitching methods, and raised embroidery. Its pattern system has formed a symbolic meaning system with the core of "blessing, emolument, longevity, wealth, offspring, harmony, peace, merit, celebration, and auspiciousness" in the long-term development, carrying auspicious culture through homophonic and symbolic means. This paper combs the semantic categories and combination rules of Chao Embroidery patterns, points out that it plays the functions of etiquette, ethics, aesthetics, and inheritance in ritual fields such as weddings, birthdays, sacrifices, and operas, and shows unique values in cross-cultural exchanges.

Keywords: Chao Embroidery, Pattern Symbolism, Auspicious Culture, Cultural Function.

1. Introduction

As an important branch of Yue embroidery, one of the "Four Famous Embroideries" in China, Chao Embroidery is famous in the world for its unique style of "full composition, rich colors, extensive use of gold and silver threads, complex stitching methods, and raised embroidery". It is not only an important representative of folk arts and crafts in the Lingnan region but also a material carrier and spiritual symbol of the profound heritage of Chaoshan culture. In October 2020, during General Secretary Xi Jinping's inspection of Chaozhou, Guangdong, he pointed out that "Chaozhou culture has distinct regional characteristics, is an important part of Lingnan culture, and is an important branch of Chinese culture." [1] In the development process of several hundred years, Chao Embroidery has gradually formed a highly mature pattern symbolic meaning system. This system culturalizes and stylizes natural objects, animals and plants, mythological figures, auspicious beast symbols, and geometric patterns, and conveys the collective wishes of the Chaoshan society for core values such as "blessing, emolument, longevity, happiness, wealth, offspring, peace, merit, and auspiciousness" through homophonic, symbolic, and combination logics.

In the traditional Chinese cultural system, embroidery is not just a simple decorative art but a symbolic language carrying rituals, beliefs, and ethical values. Chao Embroidery is particularly typical in this regard. Its patterns not only adorn wedding and birthday gifts, temple sacrifices, opera costumes, and decorative screens but also construct a cultural context that spans time and space through rich meanings. This paper intends to systematically comb and academically summarize the symbolic meaning system of commonly used Chao Embroidery patterns, explore their semantic categories, composition logics, and cultural functions, in order to reveal the multiple meanings of Chao Embroidery patterns at the levels of visual aesthetics, folk etiquette, and social values.

2. Overall Characteristics of the Symbolic Meaning System of Chao Embroidery Patterns

The pattern system of Chao Embroidery has distinct symbolized and semantic characteristics, expressing an

auspicious and festive atmosphere and the hope for a happy and fulfilling life. [1] Firstly, it takes "auspiciousness" as the highest value orientation, and almost all patterns point to beautiful visions such as happiness, prosperity, health, and harmony. Secondly, Chao Embroidery patterns highly rely on homophonic and symbolic mechanisms in their means of expression. For example, the bat is homophonic with "blessing", the deer with "emolument", the fish with "surplus", and the lotus with "continuous". Through the combination of sound and image, abstract auspicious concepts are transformed into concrete visual symbols. Thirdly, the pattern combinations of Chao Embroidery show complexity and multi-layer characteristics. Often, multiple symbols appear simultaneously in one work. For example, "dragon and phoenix presenting auspiciousness" implies marital harmony, "five bats surrounding longevity" combines blessing and longevity, and "continuous years of surplus" implies wealth and abundance.

The schema presentation and symbolic semantics of traditional Chao Embroidery are deeply influenced by religious art and drama art, forming an embroidery system with religious art and drama stories as the main semantic basis, strong colors, fine stitching methods, and gold and silver decorations as the main schema, and three-dimensional padded embroidery as the main technological feature [2].

3. Systematic Combing of Semantic Categories

The symbolic meanings of Chao Embroidery patterns can be divided into several core categories. These categories are both distinct from each other and intertwined, jointly building the cultural semantic network of Chao Embroidery. The following is developed according to the logic of "blessing - emolument - longevity - wealth - offspring - harmony - peace - merit - celebration - auspiciousness".

(1) Blessing: Well-being and Good Fortune "Blessing" is the primary category in the Chao Embroidery pattern system. The culture of blessing is an important part of the Chinese nation's culture and the foundation and destination of Chinese culture. [3] In Chao Embroidery, the bat becomes the most common auspicious symbol because it is homophonic with "blessing". A single bat implies "the arrival of blessing", two bats imply "double blessings arriving at the door", and five

bats surrounding the character for longevity or a longevity peach form "five bats surrounding longevity", symbolizing "the completeness of five blessings". According to the "Book of Documents · Hongfan", "five blessings" include longevity, wealth, health, good virtue, and a peaceful death. This ancient thought has been long-term inherited in the form of visualization by Chao Embroidery craftsmanship. The combination of bats and peaches or the character for longevity visually presents the cultural ideal of "both blessing and longevity". Such patterns are widely used in birthday screens, tablecloths, curtains, and other birthday-celebration occasions, showing the central position of "blessing" in the spiritual life of the Chaoshan society.

(2) Emolument: Official Career and Promotion "Emolument" symbolizes official career and smooth promotion. Its patterns are mainly of two types: one is the deer. Because "deer" is homophonic with "emolument", it is often juxtaposed with bats and longevity peaches to form the "blessing-emolument-longevity" combination; the other is the combination that implies official career by homophony, such as a monkey riding a horse, symbolizing "immediate promotion to a marquis"; the combination of a bee and a monkey implies "being made a marquis". "Being made a marquis" originally referred to the ancient emperors conferring the title of marquis on courtiers for their merits, which was a prominent conferment and honor. In the traditional cultural context, "being made a marquis" has gradually become a symbol of promotion and a smooth official career. Such patterns are mostly seen in the furnishings of literati's halls and export handicrafts, reflecting the combination of the business culture and the imperial examination tradition in the Chaoshan region, and also expressing the family's eager expectation for their descendants to pursue official careers and achieve fame and fortune.

(3) Longevity: Long Life and Health "Longevity" is another core category in the Chao Embroidery symbolic system. The most typical symbols include longevity peaches, pines, cranes, turtles, ganoderma lucidum, and the swastika symbol. Longevity peaches symbolize long life, pines symbolize perseverance and ever-greenness, cranes are auspicious birds for long life, turtles symbolize a long life, ganoderma lucidum is associated with the Ruyi, representing prolonging life and being satisfied. The swastika symbol originates from Buddhism and is also regarded as a mark of auspiciousness and eternity in the Chaoshan region. These patterns are commonly seen in birthday gifts, birthday-congratulating screens, and temple decorations, carrying the common wish of the Chaoshan people for the health and longevity of their elders.

(4) Wealth: Wealth and Richness "Wealth" and "richness" are another important semantic fields of Chao Embroidery. The peony, as the "king of flowers", has long been regarded as a symbol of wealth; the pomegranate not only implies "many children" because of its many seeds but also implies "many blessings and much wealth"; ingots and miscellaneous treasure patterns directly symbolize the accumulation of wealth. In Chao Embroidery works, peonies are often paired with phoenixes, implying "wealth and glory"; pomegranates are associated with children, implying "many children and many blessings". These patterns are mostly used in weddings and hall furnishings, emphasizing the prosperity and economic affluence of the family.

(5) Offspring: Reproduction and Prosperity Chao

Embroidery especially attaches importance to the symbol of "offspring reproduction" in wedding occasions. The Hundred Sons Picture is a typical example, expressing the prosperity of the family's population with the scene of many children playing. The pomegranate implies "many children" because of "a pomegranate bursting with seeds"; lotus seeds and osmanthus seeds form "continuous birth of noble sons" or "early birth of noble sons"; the Kylin delivering a son is an extension of the auspicious birth in ancient classics. These patterns reflect the concept of the Chaoshan society that attaches importance to family continuation and the prosperity of offspring, and are commonly seen in wedding quilts, bed curtains, and festive furnishings.

(6) Harmony: Marriage and Family Marital harmony are an important theme in the Chao Embroidery pattern system. The combination of dragon and phoenix presenting auspiciousness is the most typical. The dragon symbolizes dignity and strength, the phoenix symbolizes beauty and auspiciousness, and their combination implies the harmony of husband and wife and the prosperity of the family. Mandarin ducks in pairs imply "A loving couple"; twin-lotus flowers imply "a harmonious union lasting a hundred years"; lilies have become a common pattern in wedding supplies because "lily" is homophonic with "a harmonious union lasting a hundred years". These patterns are mostly used in wedding clothes, wedding quilts, wedding curtains, and dowries. Composition an important part of the visual culture of Chaoshan wedding customs.

(7) Peace: Protection and Tranquility "Peace" is a value repeatedly emphasized in the life of the Chaoshan people. The combination of a bottle and flowers forms the visual vocabulary of "peace every year" because "bottle" is homophonic with "peace"; the pattern of seawater and river cliffs implies "the country is forever secure, and the mountains of fortune and the seas of longevity", and is often used as a base pattern or border decoration, not only playing a decorative role but also symbolizing protection. Such patterns are mostly seen in temple banners, decorative hanging screens, and birthday-gift utensils, and are an indispensable motif in the ritual and religious fields of Chao Embroidery.

(8) Merit: Imperial Examinations and Official Career The imperial examination culture has a profound influence on the Chaoshan society, and "merit and imperial examinations" have become an important meaning category of Chao Embroidery. The carp leaping over the dragon gate symbolizes passing the imperial examination with high honors. Lychees, longans, and walnuts form "winning three first-class honors in a row", implying successive successes in examinations, and "winning a laurel" implies achieving success and fame. These patterns are mostly used in the furnishings of studies and wishes for students, showing the cultural tradition of the Chaoshan region that attaches importance to education and official careers.

(9) Celebration: Festivals and Good News The typical patterns in the "celebration" category are magpies and plum blossoms, implying "happiness on the eyebrows"; the double-happiness character directly conveys the festive atmosphere of weddings. Such patterns are bright in color and are mostly used in wedding and festival decorations, emphasizing a warm and cheerful atmosphere.

(10) Auspiciousness: Protection and Exorcism The category of "auspiciousness and exorcism" mostly takes auspicious beasts such as dragons, phoenixes, kylins, and

lions as the main elements, having the functions of exorcising evil, protecting, and blessing. The Eight Auspicious Symbols and the Hidden Eight Immortals are symbolic symbols of Buddhist and Taoist cultures and are widely used in temple decorations and birthday - gift fields. Such patterns reflect the pursuit of the Chaoshan society for the protection of gods and an auspicious atmosphere.

4. Combination Logic and Expression Methods

The symbolic meaning system of Chao Embroidery is not only reflected in the meaning of a single motif but also forms a complex symbolic network through combination. The combination of Chao Embroidery patterns first follows the basic law of "main body prominence - auxiliary pattern foil - meaning compounding". The main pattern is often located in the center of the picture, such as dragons and phoenixes, cranes, or longevity peaches, supplemented by decorative patterns such as flowers and clouds and water to enrich the layers. This kind of combination mostly adopts a symmetrical or balanced layout, making the work both solemn and elegant and complete in meaning. For example, "dragon and phoenix presenting auspiciousness" highlights marital harmony through two - way symmetry, and "five bats surrounding longevity" forms a compound expression of multiple symbols with bats surrounding a longevity peach.

Secondly, the combination methods of Chao Embroidery have field - dependence, and different combination patterns show their respective characteristics under different ritual backgrounds. In wedding occasions, patterns such as dragons and phoenixes, mandarin ducks, and hundred sons are mostly used, highlighting harmony and reproduction; in birthday - celebration occasions, five blessings, pines and cranes, and the Eight Immortals are commonly seen, implying longevity and health; in temples and sacrifices, more emphasis is placed on dragons and lions, river cliffs and seawater, and the Eight Auspicious Symbols, highlighting the functions of protection and exorcism; the pattern combinations on the opera stage both have character - narrative and auspicious patterns, serving the distinction of performance and identity. These patterns show that Chao Embroidery patterns are not randomly pieced together but are deeply embedded in the system of rituals and beliefs.

Finally, the combination of Chao Embroidery emphasizes the complexity and narrativity of meanings. In the same work, different motifs are often juxtaposed or intertwined to achieve multi - layer cultural expressions. For example, the combination of "dragon and phoenix + peony + magpie" has the meanings of marital harmony, wealth and glory, and celebration and auspiciousness at the same time; the composition of "bat + longevity peach + crane" conveys the multiple meanings of blessing and longevity at the same time. This complex logic not only enhances the cultural thickness of the patterns but also reflects the overall and diversified values of the Chaoshan society, making Chao Embroidery works go beyond decoration and become visual symbols carrying social memory and cultural spirit.

5. Cultural Functions and Values

The symbolic meaning system of Chao Embroidery patterns is not only a delicate art expression form but also a deep - level manifestation of the connotation of Chaoshan culture. The cultural functions and values it contains show

multi - dimensional comprehensiveness, serving both daily rituals and social life, undertaking important missions of ethics, aesthetics, and cultural inheritance, and even showing unique international values in the context of cross - cultural exchanges.

Firstly, the role of Chao Embroidery patterns in ritual functions is particularly significant. Major social rituals such as weddings, birthdays, and sacrifices are the core nodes in the lives of the Chaoshan people. Chao Embroidery, through typical patterns such as dragon and phoenix presenting auspiciousness, the Hundred Sons Picture, five bats surrounding longevity, and pines and cranes prolonging life, has become an important medium for conveying auspicious wishes and strengthening the sense of ritual. In wedding occasions, dragons and phoenixes imply marital harmony and offspring reproduction; in birthday - gift furnishings, pines and cranes prolonging life symbolize health and longevity; in temple sacrifices, dragons and lions and the pattern of seawater and river cliffs carry the functions of protection and exorcism. Through their fixed symbolic meanings, these patterns make the symbolic system of Chaoshan rituals more concrete and perceptible, becoming an important part of ritual culture.

Secondly, Chao Embroidery also has an irreplaceable meaning in ethical functions. Many Chao Embroidery works take historical and mythological figures such as Guan Yu, Nezha, and Guo Ziyi as motifs. These figure images are not only artistic reproductions but also symbols of ethical values such as loyalty, bravery, and filial piety. Through the continuous visualization and reproduction of these figure images, Chao Embroidery strengthens the identification and compliance with the traditional ethical order of loyalty, filial piety, benevolence, and righteousness in the local society, so that an interaction is formed between art and morality, thus re - emphasizing and strengthening social values imperceptibly.

Thirdly, the aesthetic function of Chao Embroidery cannot be ignored. Its pattern combinations generally pay attention to symmetry and balance, the color application is gorgeous and strong, and the stitching methods and materials achieve rich layers and three - dimensionality through processes such as padding, coiling gold, and appliqué. This visual style of "full - work laying" not only brings a very strong decorative effect but also conveys a solemn and beautiful aesthetic connotation through the formal language. Therefore, the aesthetic value of Chao Embroidery lies not only in the beauty of the patterns themselves but also in the comprehensive unity of visual order, technological skills, and cultural meanings.

Fourthly, the cultural inheritance function of Chao Embroidery highlights its importance as a national intangible cultural heritage. The symbolic system in Chao Embroidery patterns is essentially a visual expression of culture. It continues traditional concepts such as well - being, wealth, longevity, reproduction, and harmony to the present through the embroidery skills passed down from generation to generation. The embroiderers complete not only artistic creations but also the reproduction of cultural memories between stitches, so that the spiritual core of the Chaoshan society can be continuously continued at the material and non - material levels.

Finally, the pattern system of Chao Embroidery also has a prominent communication function. Since the Ming and Qing Dynasties, Chaoshan has been an important port for overseas Chinese and foreign trade. Chao Embroidery works have been continuously spread to Southeast Asia and a wider range of

areas with commerce and immigration. The symbolic semantics such as "both blessing and longevity", "dragon and phoenix presenting auspiciousness", and "continuous years of surplus" contained in its patterns not only provide a bond of cultural identity for the overseas Chinese community but also are gradually understood and appreciated by the outside world in cross - cultural dissemination. Thus, Chao Embroidery goes beyond the category of regional culture and becomes a unique symbolic resource for the external communication of Chinese traditional culture.

The symbolic meaning system of Chao Embroidery patterns shows multiple values in ritual, ethical, aesthetic, cultural inheritance, and cross - cultural communication. The multi - dimensionality of these values not only strengthens the importance of Chao Embroidery in local social life but also makes it have more far - reaching impacts in the context of global cultural exchanges. Therefore, as a double - carrier of art and culture, Chao Embroidery is not only a concentrated reflection of the history and spirit of the Chaoshan society but also an important part of Chinese traditional culture.

6. Conclusion

In summary, the symbolic meaning system of Chao Embroidery patterns is a comprehensive cultural system covering semantic categories such as "fortune, official prosperity, longevity, wealth, offspring, harmony, peace, academic and official achievements, festivity, and auspiciousness". It transforms natural and humanistic elements into a symbolic pattern language through the dual

mechanisms of homophony and symbolism, and is repeatedly applied in multiple scenarios including weddings, birthday celebrations, temples, and traditional operas, thus forming a stable combination law and cultural model.

Chao Embroidery is not only a local craft, but also a visualized cultural expression. It demonstrates the Chaoshan people's universal pursuit of a happy life and profound wisdom from the multiple dimensions of etiquette, belief, and aesthetics. In the contemporary context, the symbolic meaning system of Chao Embroidery patterns is not only a key component of intangible cultural heritage protection, but also an important resource for the cultural and creative industry and design transformation.

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